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ABSTRACT

Missouri's Parents as Teachers (PAT) program is a state-funded nontargeted early prevention service that is provided by all 543 school districts in the state. Professional educators involved in the program provide parents with the tools they need to effectively teach and nurture their young children. The PAT curriculum was designed to strengthen the foundations of later learning, language and intellectual development, curiosity, and social skills. In 1985, when pilot project participants who were 3 years old were compared with a matched comparison group, results confirmed the benefits of the program to children and their parents. Based on the success of the pilot project, the PAT program has grown significantly with support of state and local funding. Since 1985, professional staff from the pilot project have trained and credentialed 1,500 parent educators to provide PAT services. Statewide expansion has challenged the program to demonstrate its effectiveness in the inner cities, in migrant communities, and with the rural poor throughout the state. Mounting national and international interest in the program suggests that others agree that the best way to improve elementary education is to strengthen parents' role as their children's first teachers. (RH)

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PARENTS AS TEACHERS

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PARENTS AS TEACHERS: BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING

Missouri has taken the position that the school's concern for children's education begins at the onset of learning. The Parents as Teachers Program (PAT) represents a unique partnership between families and schools in that it begins in the home at the child's birth, setting the tone for a positive home-school relationship. Its primary goal is to give all children the best possible beginning, laying the foundation for school and life success. The teachers are the parents, supported by professional educators who provide them the tools they need to effectively teach and nurture their young children.

Parents as Teachers is designed to serve all parents - - from single-teenage parents to two-parent, well educated families. Experience has shown that families of all descriptions welcome the kind of support the program offers.

Established as a pilot project in four school districts in 1981, PAT is now a state-funded service provided by all 543 school districts in Missouri. During 1988-89, more than 50,000 families with children under the age of 3 are expected to participate in this voluntary program.

The PAT Support System

The pilot study was a cooperative effort of the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Danforth Foundation and four local school districts representing urban, suburban and rural communities. Some 350 families who were about to have their first child and who represented a cross section of socio-economic status, age, and family configurations were enrolled.

The PAT curriculum was designed to strengthen the foundations of later learning -- language and intellectual development, curiosity, and social skills. Then, as now, the program provided the following services to achieve this goal:

- Regularly scheduled home visits by specially trained parent educators to offer timely information on child development, practical ways to foster growth and learning and deal with difficult situations.
- Group meetings with parents of like-aged children to share experiences, concerns, frustrations and success.
- Periodic monitoring and formal screenings to insure against youngsters reaching age 3 with an undetected health problem, handicap or developmental delay.
- A referral network to help parents link with any needed special services that are beyond the scope of PAT.

The PAT Payoff

In 1985, when children in the pilot project reached age 3, a randomly selected group was tested against a carefully matched comparison group. Results of this evaluation, conducted by an independent

research firm, confirmed the benefits of the program. At age 3, children in the pilot project were:

- Significantly more advanced than other children in language development.
- Significantly ahead in problem solving and other intellectual abilities.
- Significantly advanced in demonstrating coping skills and positive relationships with adults.

The evaluation also showed that parents and children benefited from the program, regardless of socioeconomic status and traditional risk factors. Parent satisfaction with the program was nearly 100 percent.

Research is now being conducted with a sample of 2500 families in 37 diverse school districts to provide additional data about the effectiveness of PAT. A longitudinal study of project and comparison children as they enter school is also underway.

Statewide Expansion

Based on the success of the pilot project, the PAT Program has experienced significant growth since 1985, with support of state and local funding. The Early Childhood Development Act, passed by the Missouri legislature in 1984, authorized state funding for the first time to support parent education services (birth-4) and developmental screening (1-4) in all local school districts. The services are mandatory on the part of school districts and voluntary on the part of parents. Enactment of the law was a priority of the Commissioner of Education, the State Board of Education, the governor, key legislators, and influential state and community leaders. It was strongly supported by all state agencies serving families.

The first state funds for PAT were appropriated during 1985-86, providing for service to a minimum of 10 percent of the families with children under 3. State funding has been increased steadily each succeeding year to allow for manageable growth and to expand services to include 3 and 4 year-olds.

Since 1985, professional staff from the pilot project have trained and credentialed some 1,500 parent educators to provide PAT services. Parent educators are women and men who have backgrounds in early childhood education/development, nursing or social work involving young children and their parents. To maintain program quality, the State Board of Education sets specific standards for parents educators and for local program operations. A comprehensive program of regional inservice training and on-site consultation and assistance is also provided.

Statewide expansion has challenged the program to demonstrate its effectiveness in the inner cities, in migrant communities and with the rural poor throughout the state. Success can be documented through examples such as:

- A school district reducing its dropout rate to zero for adolescent parents and expectant parents through PAT.
- A group of Ozark Mountain parents asking the school to teach them correct English so they can better teach their children.
- Toddlers of mentally retarded mothers developing on target because parent educators gear the program to parents' level of understanding.
- Inner city 3-year olds from disadvantaged families scoring too high on eligibility tests for the district's Chapter I preschool to qualify for that program.

Although delivered by the public schools, PAT has been a public/private partnership from the outset. Its widespread support can be attributed to its many benefits. Health care providers see it as improving children's physical well-being. Mental Health, Social Services, and Corrections view it as preventing and reducing abuse and neglect. Churches endorse it as strengthening family life. Business sees its potential for reducing stress and improving the quality of life for employees. Schools, of course, realize the benefits of reducing the need for special and remedial education and of forming a positive relationship with families from early on.

Unlike many efforts that address the problems of underachievement and school failure, PAT is a non-targeted early prevention program. The need for support and assistance in the parenting role crosses all socioeconomic and educational levels. It has been the Missouri experience that high-risk families are attracted to the program because it is open to everyone and does not imply inadequacy on their part or view them as bad parents. Their special needs are met through intensified service.

National Dissemination and Replication

Widespread interest in the PAT Program is illustrated by the thousands of inquiries that have come from around the world. Professionals from more than 30 states, Canada, Great Britain and Saudi Arabia have come to Missouri for training in the model. As of November, 1988, PAT has been initiated in 30 sites outside Missouri. Efforts directed toward statewide implementation are underway in Texas and Rhode island. Educators and government officials from as far away as Japan, Australia and New Zealand have come to Missouri to observe the program in operation.

Extensive media coverage and awards, including the prestigious Innovations in State and Local Government Award from the Ford Foundation and Harvard University School of Government, have increased the program's national visibility. This, together with the number and scope of requests for information, consultation and training suggested the appropriateness of developing a center for national dissemination and program expansion. Early in 1987, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education established the PAT National Center in cooperation with the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The center provides the following services for personnel in Missouri and for professionals from other states and nations:

- PAT institutes on program implementation.
- Inservice workshops and seminars, as well as summer advanced training.
- Consultation by Center staff and program observation and consultation in local school districts.
- Customized training programs by special arrangement.
- Program and materials development and adaptation.
- Research and evaluation activities to further study program effectiveness and to document program adaptations for diverse populations, e.g. teen parents and urban and rural low-income families.

Outside funding from foundations including, Ford, Danforth, Smith Richardson and others, makes possible the research and national dissemination activities. A National Advisory Board, appointed by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, lends direction and support to the Center. The Board

includes leading educators and child development specialists from across the nation.

Conclusion

William Bennett, Former U.S. secretary of Education, stated in First Lessions: The 1986 Report on Elementary Education, "Parents belong at the center of a young child's education. The single best way to improve elementary education is to strengthen parents' role in it, both by reinforcing their relationship with the school and by helping and encouraging them in their own critical job of teaching the young. Not all teachers are parents, but all parents are teachers."

We in Missouri believe that without a better beginning than we have traditionally provided our youngest citizens, the long-term benefits of school reform may elude us. The mounting international interest in our program suggests that others share our conviction that empowering parents as first teachers is one of the wisest investments we can make to improve our schools.

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